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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 008600

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER SET FOR A NEW CABINET POST; HANI AL-MULKI TO REPLACE HIM

REF: AMMAN 7862

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES DAVID HALE, REASONS 1.4 (B) & (D)

1. (C) Summary. Foreign Minister Muasher informed us that he will leave his job with next week's cabinet reshuffle. He has been offered a senior post to drive the King's public sector and administrative reform agenda. Muasher, aware of the considerable obstacles to the political component of reform, reluctantly agreed provided he is given the authority and title of deputy prime minister. Current Ambassador to Egypt, Hani al-Mulki, is to take over the MFA. Other expected changes in the reshuffle are consistent with reftel expectations. End Summary.

2. (C) Foreign Minister Muasher confirmed on October 18 to A/S Burns and Charge that he will be leaving the Foreign Ministry in the cabinet reshuffle, scheduled for announcement on October 23. He is to be replaced by a former minister and current Jordanian Ambassador to Egypt, Hani al-Mulki. Muasher said the King had asked him to remain in the cabinet as a minister for public sector reform. Muasher said he would reluctantly accept only if given the title of deputy prime minister. Prime Minister al-Fayez has resisted retaining such a deputy position in the reshuffled government, but Muasher expected the King to persuade Fayez to accept this condition. Although the position carries no constitutional authorities, Muasher felt he needed the moral authority of the deputy role if he is to make any progress across ministries.

3. (C) Another concern Muasher said he expressed to the King was the perception that the government was reversing course on political reforms, and shifting attention to public sector and administrative reform as a priority. (For days, GOJ spin-doctors have fed precisely that line to the local press.) The King reportedly expressed some alarm that Muasher had detected an international perception that his interest in political reform was flagging. He insisted Muasher would be fully empowered to pursue political reform; the current political development ministry's responsibilities would fall to Muasher. His only reservation, the King claimed, was moving to a one man, one vote electoral system with districts more representative of the population (versus the current gerrymandered districts favoring East Bankers) by the next parliamentary election in 2007.

4. (C) Muasher said his role would be to improve the performance of the prime ministry, work out with each cabinet minister a mission work plan and be the judge of the results, and act as the center-point for government reforms. The aim was to have a national agenda, encompassing all ministries, work plans, in place by June 2005. The cabinet would organize itself into a number of teams, to include economic development, social and political reform, and security and defense. Much of this performance-driven structural work flows from advice by an international private sector consultant and the British government, which has advised on ways to replicate aspects of the British cabinet model. Muasher said he would also be in charge of communications and information strategy; a new government spokesman would work for him and there would be no reconstitution of the Information Ministry. Muasher would work physically from the prime ministry, and was focused on the pressing need of recruiting new staff) he wanted fresh outsiders, rather than current civil servants. Muasher expressed some dismay that the King was insistent that he take on duties that, in his words, were not my line.

5. (C) The cabinet reshuffle remains a work in progress, with much of the back and forth among aspiring ministers played out in the press. Finance Minister Abu Hammour the same day elaborated on the cabinet structure with the Charge. He said the cabinet was meeting on a daily basis in anticipation of the October 21 cabinet retreat and subsequent re-shuffle, to approve laws and regulations associated with the reform initiative, focused on public sector reform. He claimed Finance will be gaining more authority, and described a three-year streamlining effort to consolidate economic ministries into two ministries (if this is true, the new cabinet is getting off in the wrong direction, as it is expected to grow from 20 to 26 ministers for political reasons). He claimed that by 2007 Finance will gain most of the Planning Ministry's functions, with the remainder going

to the Economy Ministry. Although this approach, if pursued, will change Planning Minister) and leading reformist) Awadallah,s platform, he can be counted on for now to retain or gain power under virtually any scenario.

16. (C) Comment: Muasher is justifiably skeptical about his capacity to push through both administrative and political reforms in this new position. The Prime Minister has not shown a strong drive toward reform, and Muasher will be trying to corral a group of highly energetic ministers each keen to shine before the King. Vigorous pursuit of this portfolio will make Muasher the visible scapegoat for the loss of jobs and patronage inherent in true administrative reform) reinforcing this liberal, Christian minister,s unpopularity in parliament and among East Bank constituencies. Muasher expected some new ministers would be drawn from these very anti-reform elements to satisfy the King,s loyalist base, further complicating Muasher,s task. Muasher will also face continued resistance from the GID, whose head, Saad Khayr, may have played the decisive role in convincing the King to remove Muasher) a decision taken during the FM,s month-long absence on official travel. Khayr, who can tread heavily into foreign policy issues, has long competed with and lobbied against Muasher) even accusing him, unfairly, as being &more Palestinian than the Palestinians.⁸ An August statement by Muasher that appeared to tone down critical comments by the King directed against Arafat gave Muasher,s opponents here some traction.

17. (C) The regime,s enthusiasm for political reform has cooled, at least for now. The selection of Muasher for this overarching reform role may be aimed at creating the illusion, rather than the reality, of commitment to political change. Another interpretation may be that the King,s commitment remains firm, and Muasher will serve as a credible symbol of that resolve, as well as a convenient lightning rod for domestic criticism. In either scenario, Muasher is likely to face considerable difficulties and frustrations. But as the King has put PM Fayez on notice that his tenure will be short unless he moves rapidly on a) getting socio-economic reforms through parliament, and b) cracking down on the Islamic and secular opposition, this entire new cabinet arrangement may be provisional.

18. (C) With this change, the U.S. loses a key Foreign Minister partner on the whole range of policy challenges we face in the region. Muasher has stood out among Arab Foreign Ministers for his commitment to regional reforms and played critical roles in forming an Arab League consensus to endorse the road map and in pressing his Arab colleagues to move rapidly in recognizing and supporting the IIG. After the expected reshuffle announcement on October 23, a call from the Secretary to both Muasher and Mulki would be well received. Mulki was described by Muasher as sharing his own passion for Jordanian and regional reform. The son of a former Prime Minister and regime stalwart, Mulki held a number of technical ministries in the 1990s and was within the advisory circle surrounding then-Crown Prince Hassan. Like many of Hassan,s cohorts, he was put out to pasture upon Hassan,s demotion and the accession to the throne of Abdullah) in his case, to the Embassy in Egypt. He has clearly repaired the damage.

HALE